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ABSTRACT

While the founders of the penny press did not set out to establish a truer form of journalism, they did popularize both low prices for newspapers and newspaper economics based on sales instead of political party backing. The history of "The Sun," "The Herald," and "The Tribune" disprove the idea (advanced by journalism scholars) that the penny press (founded in the 1830s) foreshadowed modern journalism. Although these early penny press giants did contribute in some ways to future journalism, their newspapers contained much material that could not be considered modern or innovative. Benjamin Day created the New York "Sun" in 1833 without the backing of any political party, a distinct handicap in the era of political party sponsored newspapers. The paper cost only a penny, compared to six cents for other newspapers. Day constantly attacked other papers in an effort to win a firm spot in Americans' reading habits for the "Sun." He and George Wisner gave it saucy writing and made it manageable in size. James Gordon Bennett, intrigued by the success of the "Sun," founded "The Herald" in 1835, which adopted the successful format of the "Sun." As Bennett saw it, the new paper would essentially solve all the problems of mankind. Horace Greely founded "The New York Tribune" in 1841 with the mission of teaching the true principles of government--a Whig true government--and seeing that they were carried out. Greely offered news and literature, but the "Tribune's" outstanding feature was its Whig politics. (Ninety-seven notes are included.) (RS)

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The Founding of the Penny Press: Nothing New Under *The Sun*, *The Herald*, or The *Tribune*

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The Founding of the Penny Press: Nothing New Under *The Sun*, *The Herald*, or The *Tribune*

Benjamin was a dreamer who liked to dabble in new ideas that would benefit his printing business. It had occurred to him of late that perhaps people might be tempted to buy a newspaper for a penny. After all, most everyone had a penny in his pocket. However, the idea of selling papers one at a time defied the subscription system that had traditionally supported the newspaper industry. Ben had thought about that problem and had come up with an answer. Ambitious workers could buy copies of the paper from his office at a cheap price and then resell them in the streets for a penny, keeping the profits.[1]

Benjamin was *not* Benjamin Day, the acknowledged founder of the penny press movement, although it does sound like him. Day has been lauded for getting newspapers to all the people by charging just a penny and by having boys hawk them in the streets starting in 1833. But the Benjamin described above was Benjamin Mecom; the paper, *The Penny Post* of Philadelphia; and the year, 1769. The *Post* was not a success. Still other men tried and failed at selling papers for a penny before Day's New York *Sun* succeeded. The *Cent* of Philadelphia died a young death, as did the *Bostonian.* New York's *Morning Post* started out at two cents a copy and quickly went to a penny, but it folded in three weeks.[2]

Clearly, Day was not the first American to attempt a penny paper. Like Benjamin Mecom and other penny pressmen before him, Day was trying to make a living by making his product affordable and pleasing to readers. When he founded the first successful penny paper, he did not see the penny press as some truer form of newspapers or as the foundation of future journalism.

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[1] *The Penny Post* (Philadelphia), 13 January, 1769.
[2] Frank M. O'Brien, *The Story of the Sun* (1st edition, 1928; 2nd edition, New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 3. (Page references are to 2nd edition.)

That statement flies in the face of conventional wisdom on the penny press. Scholars over and over again have lauded Day as the founder of a brave new world of journalism, a modern world, breaking at last from the peculiarities of the colonial press and the biases of the party press. But Day and two other famous penny pressmen, James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley, did not think of themselves as developers of modern journalism. Instead, Day was searching for a way to make his press profitable. Bennett saw himself as an editorial genius put on earth to enlighten mankind -- and he realized the affordable penny press was a good way to spread his gospel to vast numbers of readers. Greeley perceived that the penny press was popular and adapted it to the traditional party press format. Of course, these early penny press giants did contribute in some ways to future journalism, but their newspapers also contained much material that could not be considered modern or innovative. In fact, in their zeal to succeed, they tended to adopt tried and true journalistic forms that were already in use.

Literature Review

Perhaps because of the fact that scholarship on the penny press started in the heyday of cheap newspapers, early penny press historians consistently saw penny papers as the be-all and end-all of journalism. Here journalism had progressed. Here was journalism's crowning achievement. Here was modern journalism in all of its glory.

Frederic Hudson was probably the best-known of early historians to tout the penny press as modern journalism. Hudson had been managing editor of *The Herald*, one of the penny press's most successful efforts. His 1873 historical work, *Journalism in the United States*, described the penny press as "The Revolution" in journalism. *The Sun* pioneered the penny press idea, Hudson said, and *The Herald* took the concept to new heights by transforming the penny press into the independent press.[3]

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[3]Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States, from 1690 to 1872* (original, 1873; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 418. (Page references are to reprint edition.), p. 427.

Another historian who wrote during the penny press era also saw penny journalism as a modern perfection of an ancient craft. Identifying himself only as "A Journalist," the writer of *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett* proclaimed proudly that the penny press was a giant and modern institution, thanks to the farsighted founder of *The Sun*, Benjamin Day. "He it is that began to prepare the public for a profitable and civilizing habit of reading" by making newspapers available cheaply, the author wrote. Like Hudson, "A Journalist" then lauded Bennett as the founder of the independent press.[4]

Even Horace Greeley, writing his autobiography, recalled the founding of his penny political paper, *The New York Tribune*, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. He seemed chagrined that the early *Tribune* had not passed up the old party format. He tried to justify himself by mixing the old-fashioned politics of the early *Tribune* with something more modern. He said, "My leading idea was the establishment of a journal removed alike from servile partisanship on the one hand and from gagged, mincing neutrality on the other."[5] Similarly, his biographer James Parton defended the *Tribune's* political stance by claiming that even neutral papers such as *The Sun* were actually linked to various parties.[6] Like Greeley, Parton wished to protect the memory of the early *Tribune* against comparisons to more "progressive" journalism styles.

For some reason, the early and pervasive idea that the penny press was the beginning of modern journalism stuck. Profiling Benjamin Day's newspaper, Frank M. O'Brien's *The Story of the Sun* said that newspapers came into their rightful place and form thanks to Day's genius. Day somehow had a gift for knowing what the news should be, as O'Brien saw it. O'Brien condemned editors of pre-penny newspapers for favoring essays over "a first-class report of a kidnapping" and political speeches over "a good street

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[4]"A Journalist," *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett and His Times* (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855), pp. 178, 184, 191, 193, and 199. "A Journalist" has, since 1855, been identified as Isaac Pray.
[5]Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York: J.B. Ford & Co., 1868), pp. 137 and 141.
[6]James Parton, *The Life of Horace Greeley* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1855; reprint edition, New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1970), pp. vii and 192. (Page references are to reprint edition.)

tragedy."[7] Clearly, O'Brien saw a news-oriented, modern press as the culmination of journalism.

Oliver Carlson, profiling James Gordon Bennett in *The Made Who Made News*, likewise saw the penny press as the beginning of a brave, new, and correct world for journalism. He saw Bennett, rather than Day, as the founder of that better journalism, but basically his outlook matched that of earlier historians. Carlson said that Bennett defied journalism as it had been -- journalism centered on opinion and gossip and literary fare pasted carelessly into news pages. "Bennett wanted -- and was determined to create -- a *news*paper," Carlson said. "That concept itself was one of the most revolutionary in the whole history of journalism. . . ."[8]

Even the more recent socialist-historian Michael Schudson continued the tradition of describing the penny press as modern journalism in his *Discovering the News*. Schudson said that penny papers "radically broke with tradition and established the model which the mainstream of American journalism has since followed." Schudson saw an underlying economic explanation of the penny press. He felt that penny papers' emphasis on advertising rather than on political patronage allowed newspapers to move to a modern economic base grounded in the marketplace and advertising. He lauded the penny press as being politically independent, and he added that penny papers invented the concept of news.[9]

It was a rare historian who saw flaws in penny press historiography. One such scholar, John Nerone, in *The Culture of the Press in the Early Republic,* recognized the fact that the penny press was not the first type of newspaper to appreciate the value of neutrality and objectivity. Likewise, he noted that there were many types of newspapers in

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[7]O'Brien, pp. 1 and 9.
[8]Oliver Carlson, *The Man Who Made News: James Gordon Bennett* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1942), pp.125-126.
[9]Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 17-18, 21-22, and 49-50.

the penny era -- not just penny press and party papers, as historians had simplistically described. Nerone drew his conclusions after studying Cincinnati newspapers. Despite his concept that the penny press across the nation had been misjudged by historians, he tended to see the New York penny press as accurately portrayed.[10] In reality, the flaws he saw in penny press historiography applied to the New York penny giants as well. As Nerone noticed in studying Cincinnati, papers such as Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* were not uniquely modern, either in their own day or by today's standards.

Benjamin Day, George Wisner, and the New York *Sun*

Benjamin Day was desperate. Quite desperate. His struggling printing business was not working out as it should. He needed to make money. After much soul-searching, he came up with the idea of selling a newspaper for a penny -- perhaps because a friend had always dreamed of such a thing. The friend had even called his mythical newspaper the *Sun*.[11]

Day created his New York *Sun* out of gut instinct. He had to; he was not backed by any particular political party, and that was a distinct handicap in the era of party-sponsored newspapers. True, there were some papers that were non-political, but they cost six cents a copy, just like the political papers.[12] Day had no assurance whatsoever that his cheap newspaper could work. Eighteen years after the birth of *The Sun*, Day admitted:

> It is true I originated the *Sun*, the first penny newspaper in America, and as far as I have known, the first in the world. But I have always considered the circumstance as more the result of accident than any superior sagacity of mine. It was in 1832 that I projected the enterprise, during the first cholera [epidemic], when my business as a job printer scarcely afforded a living. I must say I had very little faith in its success at that time, and from various causes it was put off. In August, 1833, I finally made up my mind to venture the experiment. . . .[13]

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[10]John Nerone, *The Culture of the Press in the Early Republic: Cincinnati, 1793-1848* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), pp. 82-83, 88-89, 92, and 283-235.

[11]O'Brien, p. 1.

[12] *The Journal of Commerce* (New York), for instance, was not considered political. See *The Sun* (New York), 22 November 1833.

[13]Benjamin Day in an 1851 speech honoring Colonel R.M. Hoe, quoted in Hudson, p. 418.

With such shaky confidence, Day was willing to try anything to make the little newspaper sell. He felt as though the price would help the newspaper survive. He hinted at that idea in his prospectus, which read, "The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY. . . ." Clearly, the news would be important, but so would inexpensive cost of the paper. Day reiterated the price issue by noting that if advertising forced the size of the paper to go up, the cost of the *Sun* would still be a penny.[14]

Grasping at other straws, Day picked up on newspaper forms which had proved popular for years. He ran poetry and literary fare in his *Sun*, and he printed the shipping news. Those items had been common American newspaper topics for well over a century, ever since the colonial era. Day also turned to an idea that was already in place in some New York newspapers: the police report. He clipped the police news from a rival newspaper to round out the empty space in his first issue.[15]

Police news was not original to either Day or the penny press. Such news was popular in London already,[16] and New York six-penny dailies had picked up on its popularity. In fact, Day's soon-to-be police reporter and partner, George Wisner, was reporting police news for another newspaper in the city.[17] Wisner joined Day on *The Sun* shortly after it was founded, and Day announced him as a full partner on October 24, 1833.

The addition of police news was no breakthrough on Day's part. He was just capitalizing on existing newspaper material that would fill up his pages. But as it turned out, the addition of George Wisner to write those police reports *was* a big breakthrough. Wisner turned out police stories with a flair and wit that won readers to *The Sun*. His reports from the police court gained notoriety as the kind of gossip people wanted to read about their neighbors. His stories ran something like this one:

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[14] *The Sun* (New York), 3 September 1833.
[15] O'Brien, pp. 5 and 90.
[16] *The Sun* quoted *The People's Police Gazette* of London on 2 January 1834, for example.
[17] *Sun*, 9 September 1833.

> Mr and Mrs Townsend made their appearance this morning to settle their connubial disputes after the manner the law has prescribed. It appeared on investigation, that Mrs Townsend asked her husband yesterday for a two shilling piece to buy some brandy 'to wash the children's heads;' that the husband not believing that his lady would allow the spiritous liquid to go as high as the head, without saluting it with her lips, refused to grant the request; a quarrel ensued, and Mr Townsend was driven out of the house by the infuriated dame. Last evening, when Mr T. returned from his work to get his supper, he found his wife in an unmentionable condition, and upon his upbraiding her, she took up the tongs and smote him over the head. Mr T. then knocked her down. They were both committed.[18]

Wisner's writing rang true and clever. He had a knack for letting the reader hear every word that was spoken. He wrote of one defendant who testified in court to visiting his "lubly Dinah" and making merry with her over a bottle of "sperits," which were the best that could be had for "lub nor money."[19] In a similar vein, his reports often took the form of a playwright's script, starkly framing their somewhat morose brand of humor. For example:

> Charlotte Neale was brought up on a charge of being drunk and noisy. It had been her unhappy fate to get drunk very often -- she had lived in New York for forty years, and did'nt recollect of being sober more than two days at any one time during the whole period.
>
> Magistrate -- Your unhappy fate? what do you mean? Can't you see the liquor, when you drink it?
>
> Prisoner -- Oh, no, Sir! it goes down my throat like oil, and I'm drunk before I know it.
>
> Mag. -- How long is it since you were drunk before?
>
> Pris. -- About a week, your honor.
>
> Mag. -- How came you to be addicted to this habit of getting drunk?
>
> Pris. -- My husband used to abuse me, and I got drunk out of *spite.*
>
> Mag. -- Well, now put your finger in that candle, to spite your being brought up here?
>
> Pris. -- That would burn me, your honor.[20]

Day and Wisner together had stumbled on a formula that worked. People were actually beginning to identify the cheap press with police reports. The two became semi-synonymous.[21] The unconfident Day became self-assured and even bold about the success of his newspaper. Banking on the popular combination of Wisner's style and *The Sun's*

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[18]Ibid., 2 November 1833.
[19]Ibid., 11 November 1833.
[20]Ibid., 23 November 1833.
[21]See, for example, Ibid., 27 June 1835; 23 July 1834, and 4 September 1834.

low price, Day began jabbing at other forms of journalism. Describing the ideal editor, he derided editors of non-penny papers. He said, "[The ideal editor's] talents were not estimated by the size of the sheet which he printed; his respectability did not consist in his being espoused to a particular party; his honor was not concerned in every petty political squabble." Some of the largest and most well-known journals of the day were just what Day's "ideal editor" had scoffed at -- physically huge in page size, and infinitely concerned with details of politics. Furthermore, they were linked to political parties, and as Day put it, they were "the slave of every monied tyrant in the circle of [their] patrons." He saw *The Sun* as a refreshing contrast and urged his readers to see that fact, too.[22]

Day kept on needling other newspapers for various sins. In the process, he was carefully carving a niche for his little paper amongst all the others. He announced to a reader who had sent in an article for publication that his piece was "too prolix for our columns. . . . He must have calculated it for the Courier & Enquirer." Large-sized newspapers such as the *Courier & Enquirer* specialized in tedious and dull articles, as Day saw it, and he wanted his readers to appreciate the spriteliness of *The Sun*. "In our country, (and we regret the fact), the merit of a speech, or newspaper article, is measured by its duration and space," he said. "In Greece, an orator was praised for speaking well . . . if there had been newspaper editors in Greece, they would have vied with each other, not which could write the longest, but the best article."[23] Similarly, Day warned that William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator* was an "incendiary print," catering to wild-eyed abolitionists.[24] In another issue he described a rival journalist who questioned the truthfulness of *The Sun's* police reports as "a contemptible reporter of as contemptible a press." In fact, Day intimated to his readers, the newspaper which had

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[22]Ibid., 20 November 1833.
[23]Ibid., 24 October 1833.
[24]Ibid., 10 September 1833.

issued the question made up stories to please the parties involved, while *The Sun* could prove the accuracy of its reports by "official papers, signed by impartial men."[25]

Day's attacks on other papers illustrated his nervous resolve to win *The Sun* a firm spot in American reading habits. After all, as Day was well aware, *The Sun*'s only unique feature was its penny price. Otherwise, it carried features available in other newspapers. He and Wisner were actually just combining various forms and article styles that could be had elsewhere. Readers instead might like a different combination and might find their newspaper diet satisfied by something else. After all, there were abolition papers,[26] party papers,[27] extremely large papers,[28] and papers much smaller than *The Sun*.[29] There were labor papers and temperance papers, and the arch-rivals *Journal of Commerce* and *Evening Post* were neutral papers, like *The Sun*.[30] There were also medical papers,[31] fashion journals,[32] women's papers,[33] and liberal papers.[34] Before long there were other penny papers, too.[35] And there were other papers that wrote police reports. One particularly deceitful rival newspaper actually lifted police stories from the book *Mornings in Bow Street* and changed the names and locations for publication in its police columns. At least, that's what Day claimed.[36]

Day was fairly amiable to his rivals, but in his zeal to protect *The Sun*, he got particularly testy if competitors or readers questioned the newspaper's most attractive features. For instance, when a reader asked if the police reports were true, Day and Wisner together replied by refusing to publish the inquiry until the writer dropped by the office for

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[25]Ibid., 19 September 1834.
[26]Mentioned in Ibid., 10 September 1833.
[27]Mentioned in Ibid., 20 November 1833, and 17 May 184..
[28]Mentioned in Ibid., 30 April 1834.
[29]Mentioned in Ibid., 5 September 1834.
[30]Mentioned in Ibid., 22 November 1833, and 19 December 1833.
[31]Mentioned in Ibid., 19 December 1833.
[32]Mentioned in Ibid., 26 December 1833.
[33]Mentioned in Ibid., 30 December 1833.
[34]Mentioned in Ibid., 27 December 1833.
[35]Ibid., 27 June 1835, and 30 April 1835.
[36]Ibid., 15 February 1834.

a private interview so they could prove the truth of the reports. The editors went on to brag that police reports were quite useful; a subscriber had recently discovered by reading the police news that his own stolen fireplace tools had been recovered by law enforcement authorities.[37] In another story, Day and Wisner chided the editor of the *Man* for objecting to the publication of names in *The Sun's* police news.[38] The names gave the stories reality, and the editors knew it.

There were other slurs against *The Sun.* Replying to one of them, Day and Wisner said spitefully:

> We are glad to see these small vehicles of information [penny papers] increasing throughout the country. Some of the mammoth sheets already begin to tremble -- and before long they will be obliged to reduce their price to $8 per annum, (which is enough in all conscience,) or retire to make room for what Col. [James Watson] Webb [a competitor], in one of his jealous fits has thought proper to denominate "the penny trash" -- with which they are already surrounded.

Day and Wisner retorted to Colonel Webb, "We challenge any daily newspaper in America to exhibit a circulation as large as that of The Sun."[39]

As time went on, it became clear that *The Sun* had found a place in the sun. Day and Wisner had -- by accident more than by design -- stumbled on a way to make the long dreamed-of penny press succeed: they gave it saucy writing and made it manageable in size. It thus appealed to people who could afford a penny. It got New Yorkers from all walks of life reading newspapers. Even the rival *Journal of Commerce*, one of the large-sized, six-penny papers, realized that Day's shaky venture of 1833 had made a permanent mark by 1835. The *Journal* wrote:

> *Penny Papers* -- It is not quite two years since the first Penny Paper was established. Now there are half a dozen or more of them in this city, with an aggregate circulation of twenty or thirty thousand, or perhaps more. Their issues exceed those of the large papers, and for aught we can see, they are conducted with as much talent; and in point of moral character we think candidly they are superior to their six-penny contemporaries. . . . The number of newspaper readers is probably doubled by their influence, and they circulate as pioneers among those

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[37] Ibid., 2 September 1834.
[38] Ibid., 11 June 1834.
[39] Ibid., 30 April 1834.

> classes who have suffered greatly from want of general intelligence. . . .We wish our penny associates all success, hoping that they will grow wise, good and great, until they make every six-penny paper ashamed that tells a lie or betrays its country for the sake of a party, or does any other base thing.[40]

While the *Journal of Commerce* lauded the penny press for being cheap, morally apolitical, and effective in reaching everyone, Day and Wisner had more specific ideas about what made *The Sun* great. They told their readers that an ideal newspaper such as theirs offered many things rolled up into one: deaths, puns, poetry, marriages, jests, and anecdotes; folklore and oddities; foreign news and domestic tidbits; advertisements, and more. And as with everything else in the pioneer penny press of Benjamin Day and George Wisner, that description of an ideal newspaper was not original. They had reprinted it from the *Evening Post*.[41]

The idea of a penny newspaper was not new; its contents were not new; nor were its philosophy and outlook. Interestingly,Wisner himself did not see *The Sun* as an important new journalistic form that needed replication. After leaving New York, he went to Michigan and started his own newspaper. It was not a duplication of *The Sun.* Instead, it was a traditional party paper.[42]

Even after Wisner departed, *The Sun* continued to rise brighter each day, and it became obvious to other newsmen that the penny press newspapers were rapidly drawing a wide readership. Other journalists rushed into the penny paper market.

James Gordon Bennett and *The New York Herald*

James Gordon Bennett, editor of New York's *Courier & Enquirer,* was eccentric. Highly eccentric. In fact, he considered himself to be something of an editorial messiah. Two years before *The Sun* was founded, he was trying to define his mission as a sort of journalistic savior. Bennett announced that "[a]n editor must always be with the people--

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[40]Quoted in Ibid., 27 June 1834. *The Sun* noted that it corrected the first sentence to reflect the actual start of the penny press.
[41]Ibid., 19 December 1833.
[42]Wm. David Sloan, "George W. Wisner: Michigan Editor and Politician" *Journalism History* 6,#4 (1979-1980), 113-116.

think with them--feel with them--and he need fear nothing, he will always be right--always be strong--always popular, always *free*." As he saw it, his job was to outshine "spouters, and talkers, and conventioners, and legislators, [for]. . . this is the editorial age--and the most intellectual of all past ages."[43]

Although Bennett was trying all along to live up to his definition of an editor's mission, his paper had not gained the extreme popularity and high readership -- and accompanying editorial power -- that *The Sun* rapidly achieved upon its founding. Bennett was intrigued by the success of *The Sun*. In *The Sun's* formula to reach the masses, Bennett saw a way to make his vision of the Age of the Editor become a concrete reality. He grabbed hold of the idea of penny newspapers and created *The Herald* in May of 1835. The new paper adopted wholesale Day's successful blueprint: it cost a penny; it was sold by the copy; it emphasized news; it was meant to appeal to a truly mass audience. In short, Bennett had at last found a newspaper that might reach all the people with his gospel of journalism.

As Bennett saw it, the new paper would essentially solve all the problems of mankind. Bennett told his readers:

> I mean to make the *Herald* the great organ of social life, the prime element of civilization, the channel through which native talent, native genius, and native power may bubble up daily. . . . I shall mix together commerce and business, pure religion and morals, literature and poetry, the drama and dramatic purity, till the *Herald* shall outstrip everything in the conception of man. The age of trashy novels, of more trashy poems, of most trashy quarterly and weekly literature, is rapidly drawing to a close.

In fact, Bennett said, the penny press system would bring on something akin to the Biblically predicted millennium. He crowed:

> This is the age of the Daily Press, inspired with the accumulated wisdom of past ages, enriched with the spoils of history, and looking forward to a millennium of a thousand years, the happiest and most splendid ever yet known in the measured span of eternity![44]

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[43] *The Courier & Enquirer* (New York), 12 November 1831.
[44] Herald, 16 May 1835.

In order to usher in this millennium, Bennett had to create a niche for his new *Herald*. This was not easy. In fact, it was perhaps more difficult to find a spot for *The Herald* than it had been to find a spot for *The Sun*, for Bennett was competing with the hugely popular *Sun* and another penny paper which had sprung up in New York, *The Transcript*, along with traditional six-penny papers. To make things even more difficult, *The Herald* burned to the ground six weeks after its founding. But Bennett bounced back, announcing that the newspaper's "soul was saved -- its spirit as exhuberant as ever." In fact, he said, he had already gotten a subscription list of 7,000 customers. He announced that he intended to boost circulation to nothing less than 25,000 per day. He bragged that advertisers found his paper was read by six times as many people as who read the dull and tedious *Courier & Enquirer*.

To resuscitate *The Herald* and to reiterate its virtues, Bennett capitalized on a hugely popular serial of false news in *The Sun* by trying to turn it to his favor. *The Sun* had duped the public with a series of fake articles about a scientist named Herschell who had supposedly seen living creatures on the moon through a new, high-powered telescope.[45] Bennett wanted to rub in the fact that *The Sun* had made fools of its readers. He assured New York that the reopening of *The Herald* and its dreams for expanded circulation were "no astronomic dream -- no Herschell discovery in the moon." He caustically invited readers to pass along newsworthy information to him, "barring always discoveries in astronomy, which our friends of the Sun monopolize."[46]

Bennett's stabs at *The Sun* were indicative of things to come at *The Herald*. If his newspaper were to succeed in uplifting mankind, it had to triumph over all pretenders to that mission. Therefore, Bennett committed himself to crusades against other newspapers. Such attacks did not spring from a journalistic desire to "scoop" other papers or to advance journalism into the modern world. Rather, the attacks sprang from Bennett's inflated ego,

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[45] *Sun*, 25-28 August 1835.
[46] *Herald*, 31 August 1835.

his unusual personality, and his wish to carry out the messianic mission that he had dreamed of so many years ago. He attacked any newspaper that might get in his way. For example, the party press, which had been so popular for some time, took blows such as this one from Bennett:

> Newspapers have become violent demagogues on one side or the other, merely to acquire a hold upon public passions of the moment so they can turn it to political uses. The whole of the fuss, noise and confusion we see around us is merely a cunning preliminary game for political influence hereafter.[47]

In contrast, he lauded the penny press with just as much vigor. "Formerly no man could read unless he had $10 to spare for a paper," Bennett pointed out. "Now with a cent in his left pocket, and a quid of tobacco in his cheek, he can purchase more intelligence, truth and wit, than is contained in such papers as the dull Courier & Enquirer, or the stupid Times for three months." In fact, he said, the *Courier & Enquirer* and the *Times* cared less about helping readers than about controlling the stock market. "All these large papers are in the hands of stock-jobbers. None are free as the mountain wind but the small dailies. We are the fellows that will tell the truth," Bennett commented.[48]

Realizing, of course, that such praise of small dailies in general made *The Sun* look good, Bennett sniped at it, too. On the surface it seemed difficult to find things to sneer at *The Sun* about, since Bennett had copied its format, price, and circulation system. But Bennett was not daunted. He went straight for the jugular. He directed some attacks through *The Sun's* acknowledged stronghold of the police news by writing *The Herald's* own police reports with a poisoned pen directed at his rival. "P. Fisher was next called to the bar, to be judged according to his deeds," Bennett wrote in one snippet from the police court. "He was one of those individuals termed 'indescribables.' At first sight, we thought that perhaps he was one of the living animals lately discovered in the moon, by Dr. Herschell."[49]

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[47]Ibid., 1 September 1835.
[48]Ibid.
[49]Ibid.

With Bennett convinced that he alone held the journalistic key to the salvation of mankind, no rival newspaper was safe from such attacks. Bennett made attacks on other papers a daily feature in *The Herald*. In each instance he built up *The Herald* as the only correct paper, the only one with the answers. According to *The Herald*, for instance, the *Journal of Commerce* misled its readers on a story about revenue fraud. Bennett vowed to set the record straight -- and did, for more than a column.[50] The *Journal of Commerce* and other three-penny papers (the price of some large papers had fallen from six pennies since the advent of *The Sun*) did not enlighten the public, but instead made everything obscure. "Devoted to party or politics, either on this side or that side, owned body and soul by some banking institution or another, the three-penny papers only discourse on those matters to deceive on one side or entrap on the other," Bennett scoffed. "Who would expect, for instance, that the Courier & Enquirer would tell the truth if it touched the United States Bank?. . . or that the Times would not hide the small linen of the Commercial Bank?"[51]

Although Bennett himself purported to be wedded to no party or faction,[52] he was stridently anti-abolitionist, pro-slavery, and pro-South. When his rivals agreed with him on such matters, Bennett had the dilemma of also agreeing with them, or decrying them and thus tacitly supporting abolition. He characteristically decided instead to handle everyone with clever put-downs. For example, he said when the *Courier & Enquirer* wrote against abolition that the newspaper did not have "a thimbleful of brains to cast a dog in the whole of this abolition business. It is as purely fanatical as the abolitionists are. It is as completely mad -- insane -- *non compos mentis*, as the Post is."[53]

The attacks against other newspapers never let up. Bennett bragged that his *Herald* featured far more advertisements than the older *Transcript*. He assured readers that every lawyer in the city of New York was laughing at an anti-abolition law as proposed by the

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[50]Ibid., 2 September 1835.
[51]Ibid., 4 September 1835.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Ibid., 2 October 1835.

Star. The *Evening Post's* editor was insane, Bennett insisted.[54] In general, he described the non-penny press as "dull, heavy, impudent, stupid large newspapers," while the penny press was "more readable and more useful."[55]

Not surprisingly, *The Sun* took the brunt of Bennett's attacks, for Bennett needed most of all to make his *Herald* look better than the similar *Sun.* Bennett strove with much energy to make clear to his readers that they should make no place for the popular *Sun.* In one particularly fiery bit of *Sun*-bashing, Bennett roared:

> We mean now to show up the Sun -- the impudent Sun -- the unprincipled Sun -- the mercenary Sun -- the low bred Sun -- the Sun that hoaxes the public -- that tells untruths for money . . . -- that cheats the whole city and country. The revulsion of public sentiment, is fast accumulating. . . . Known only for its ordinary police reports, without a particle of character or talent in its columns, its very obscurity and the credulity of a few large papers -- such as the fools who conduct the Times -- all tended to create the belief that [the Moon Hoax] was a veritable reprint from the 'Supplement to the Journal of Science'. . . . The Sun can never thrive hereafter upon the moon or any other planet. It will sink -- it has already sunk to its original inanity and insipidity.[56]

It was only a matter of time until the incessant attacks on other New York newspapers got Bennett into serious trouble. Peter Simple Townsend, editor of the *New York Evening Star,* finally had enough. He physically attacked Bennett in Wall Street one evening, hitting him in the cheek and cussing at him. An excited crowd gathered, and Townsend explained angrily that Bennett had attacked the *Star's* editorial staff in print, ridiculed their opinions, and opposed their views just once too often.[57]

Bennett scoffed in reply that Townsend was a blockhead who could not take a joke. In Bennett's account of the attack, the crowd that had gathered laughed at Townsend. Bennett offered to duel the man. "Such was the disreputable street brawl into which I was dragged by a fool," he sniffed. Townsend, he said, was "[w]ithout talents, without sense," and was a "tool of a gang of charlatans connected with the sixpenny daily press,

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[54]Ibid.
[55]Ibid., 2 September 1835.
[56]Ibid., 3 September 1835.
[57]Ibid., 8 October 1835.

who have sworn to put down the Herald -- destroy my character, and upset all my prospects. . . ."[58]

The attack stayed on Bennett's mind and in the pages of *The Herald*. He continued to jab at the *Star* and took *The Sun* to task for its report of the attack. Bennett reprinted the article that had provoked Townsend into the attack. Bennett went so far as to advise Townsend to have his head drilled open to "let in a little sense."[59]

That was not the only time Bennett was physically assaulted by another newspaperman. The *Courier & Enquirer's* James Watson Webb attacked Bennett on two different occasions. The first time Webb knocked Bennett down and then hit him with a stick. The next time Webb pushed *The Herald* editor down the steps, causing minor injuries.[60] At one point, Bennett actually fought (and survived) a duel in Hoboken, New Jersey, perhaps over the attack by Townsend.[61]

Bennett was not intimidated by such hostility. When his *Herald* offices moved to Nassau Street near the hated Anti-Slavery Society and *The Sun*, Bennett announced he would "take a few spots out of the Sun" and that he would "emasculate" the Anti-Slavery Society.[62] He continually insisted that the competition hated him for being independent and for having his own liberal, honorable opinions.[63] Bennett's implication was clear: other newspapers were not independent nor liberal nor honorable. Only *The Herald* was so virtuous, and only *The Herald* represented journalism as journalism should be. To further advance his enlightened views, Bennett announced he was going to move the editorial columns to page one of the paper. After all, he said, the editorial page was "[t]he most important part of a paper -- its eyes, face, and features. . . ." This was an improvement on

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[58]Ibid.
[59]Ibid., 10 October 1835.
[60]"A Journalist," pp. 205 and 214.
[61]As mentioned above, Bennett had offered to duel Townsend, and a duel happened shortly after that attack. Unfortunately, the newspaper containing the story of the duel does not survive.
[62]Ibid., 12 October 1835.
[63]See, for example, Ibid., 1 January 1836, 19 March 1836, and 22 July 1835.

British and American newspapers, he said, for they relegated editorials to the inside and put old, crusty news on the outside.[64]

No matter what the news was, Bennett saw to it that he boosted his own newspaper in particular and the penny press in general. He noted with pride that he got up at 6 a.m., worked all day, and was in bed at 9:30 p.m. Six-penny paper editors, on the other hand, stayed up late, ate oysters, drank brandy, and slept until noon each day. "This gives them bad habits," Bennett noted, characteristically describing the cheap press as a sort of moral redeemer. "The penny press is actually restoring the order of nature to the public. Our system begets early rising, health, and elasticity of spirits."[65]

Horace Greeley and *The New York Tribune*

Horace Greeley had tried a penny newspaper shortly before *The Sun* rose over New York, but the venture had failed after just a few weeks.[66] Now that penny papers were such a big hit, however, he decided to try again. Men of the city encouraged him. Obviously, they thought, the public liked the cheap price of the penny dailies. What better way to boost the Whig party than through a penny paper?[67]

Greeley opened his initial *New York Tribune* with the dying quote from the late President William Henry Harrison, who had survived just a month after his inauguration: "I desire you to understand the true principles of the Government. I wish them carried out --- I ask nothing more."[68] The quotation became the motto of the fledgling *Tribune*. Since the *Tribune* was a party paper, thoroughly wedded to Whig politics, the motto was appropriate. It stated the purpose and the mission of the *Tribune* succinctly: to teach the principles of true government -- a Whig true government -- and see that they were carried out. The newspaper would do it all for a penny, putting the party idea into the hands of the

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[64]Ibid., 9 February 1835.
[65]Ibid., 18 June 1836.
[66]O'Brien, p. 3. Greeley had been involved with the short-lived penny paper, the *Morning Post* of New York.
[67]Greeley, p. 136.
[68]*The New York Tribune*, 10 April 1841.

masses who so very much enjoyed the cheap price of the one-cent papers. Greeley insisted that his political paper include none of the "immoral and degrading" aspects of typical penny press police news. The *Tribune* was designed for people of virtue.[69]

Greeley had a sense that his new readers might not consider the penny press to be the proper format for a political paper, so he apologized in the first issue that he would devote the paper mainly to political matter for two days. "After Tuesday, we shall be better able to please our non-political readers," he said. There was an election on Tuesday. Until that time, he exhorted Whigs to vote:

> WHIGS of NEW-YORK! is it desirable that J. PHILLIPS PHOENIX shall be our next Mayor, with a WHIG COUNCIL? If Yea, just say the word! To be victorious now, we have but to will it!. . . . The danger lies in apathy. . . . Three days, only, bring us to the Election. BE READY![70]

The entire first issue was filled with Whig analysis, Whig views. The new president, John Tyler, was a thorough Whig, in Greeley's estimation. The local press of the city, on the other hand, was generally anti-Whig. Greeley warned that *The Sun* was run by a Loco-Foco editor, as were the *Herald* and the *Journal of Commerce*. In fact, Greeley bitterly denounced *The Sun* for its anti-Whig stance. He claimed the Whigs had lost the election two years earlier due to *The Sun's* attacks on Whig politicians. The *Herald* was nearly as bad; as Greeley put it, "It would be impossible for a journal so notoriously unprincipled and reckless to do [Whigs] more harm than the Herald does."[71]

Greeley offered news and literature, too, especially literary reviews; but far and away the *Tribune's* most outstanding feature was its Whig politics. Police news was decidedly a minority item compared to political news. The day before the election, Greeley asked that "a good Whig friend" situate himself at each polling place in New York, and ask Whigs exiting the polling place to subscribe to the *Tribune*. He urged readers to register to vote immediately and to "look out for your Whig friends and neighbors, and see that they

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[69] Prospectus for the *Tribune* as printed in *The Log Cabin* of 3 April 1841.
[70] *Tribune*, 10 April 1841.
[71] Ibid.

too are all right" and registered. He tried to whip up some Whig excitement. "Whigs!" he thundered in the *Tribune*, "we can have the City if we will!"[72]

Apparently, the Whigs of the city did not have enough will. In spite of Greeley's thrilled announcement of a "SUBSTANTIAL VICTORY" the day after the election,[73] the next day things looked worse. The Whigs had not carried the Common Council, and their mayoral candidate lost. A disgusted Greeley blamed the loss on party apathy:

> We have no patience with these provoking, mortifying details. We have lost our Mayor, and a majority in the Common Council involving patronage amounting to over a million of dollars per annum, has been disgracefully thrown away by the criminal apathy of two thousand Whigs -- *one fourth* of whom, by spending ten minutes each to vote, might have given us a Whig Mayor, and a decided majority in the Common Council.[74]

He went on to discourse about the duty of voting. Voting was not a matter of caprice, he insisted. All registered voters were obliged to go to the polls. He urged Whigs to consider the matter carefully. "Reader!" he exclaimed, "if you know a Whig who did not vote, ask him to glance over this article."[75]

Perhaps because the election turned out to be such a failure, Greeley broke his promise to reduce the flow of political news after the election. Although readers of the *Tribune* did, indeed, enjoy such things as serialized novels and short stories and current news reports, Greeley continued hacking away at Loco-Focos and other political enemies. He was sure that the Whigs could bounce back.[76] He complained that the *Journal of Commerce* had made yet another anti-Whig mistake; it had wrongly stated that a Loco-Foco had won a Congressional seat in Ohio, when in reality the Whig candidate had won. The same page featured a Whig illustration: a big stars-and-stripes-style banner blowing freely and advertising the party.[77]

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[72] Ibid., 12 April 1841.
[73] Ibid., 14 April 1841.
[74] Ibid., 15 April 1841.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 7 December 1841 and 29 December 1841, among others.
[77] Ibid., 22 October 1841.

Occasionally Greeley followed the pattern set by other newspapers of the day and attacked his rivals. His barbs, however, were not nearly so sharp as Bennett's, and rarely did they criticize rivals for anything except political matters. In a fit of pique he did once decry *The Sun* for printing a supposedly inflated report of its circulation.[78] He also scoffed at *The Sun's* recommendation of a banking scheme.[79] Of course, he had already denounced *The Sun* as anti-Whig; that may have explained his bitterness at the rival newspaper.

Greeley saw his *New York Tribune* as a Whig paper but also as a recorder of events from across America. "We desire to place it on record," he said simply.[80] To that end, he reported much news and was proud to scoop other papers.[81] However, he attributed his journalistic success to the "true high tone" of the Whig press and philosophy.[82]

Since the Whigs had fared so poorly in New York in 1841, Greeley was determined to start early on the presidential campaign of 1844. As early as June, 1842, he was begging Whigs to meet in order to boost Henry Clay for president. He also exhorted younger men to get involved in the party.[83] The pleas were energetic, maybe even a little desperate. "WHIG YOUNG MEN OF NEW-YORK!" one of the articles read, "need we entreat you to attend the Grand Rally at National Hall this evening? No! no! Altogether, friends! courage and energy! the day's our own!"[84]

Things were looking bad for the Whigs already. Greeley complained that a crafty move in Alabama had gerrymandered the state in favor of the Loco-Focos. To top that off, only six of the twenty-six states had sent Whig representatives to Congress. Fifteen

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[78]Ibid., 2 August 1841.
[79]Ibid., 30 July 1841.
[80]Ibid., 17 January 1842.
[81]See, for example, Ibid., 4 February 1842.
[82]Ibid., 7 February 1842.
[83]Ibid., 20 June 1842.
[84]Ibid., 9 April 1842.

legislators were Loco-Focos.[85] And now the *Evening Post* was accusing Whig politicians of New York of wasting money.[86]

A year after the *Tribune's* founding, election day had again come to New York. Greeley was as steeped in Whig rhetoric as ever. "TO-MORROW," election day, would be ". . .the struggle and the victory!" he rejoiced. The *Tribune* urged readers to avoid the catastrophe of low Whig voter turnout in 1841. "Speak to your sluggish neighbor today!" Greeley begged. For good measure, he printed a list of Whig candidates in the *Tribune.*[87]

The return of the election marked the removal of the *Tribune* from the list of penny newspapers. Greeley and his business manager, Thomas McElrath, raised the price of each copy to two cents. They lamented that they could not continue printing such a wide variety of news at such a bare-bones price. To keep the price at a penny, they would have to cut out all but the most basic news. That meant literary fare would be cut, too, unless readers accepted the two-penny price.[88]

The *Tribune* survived its price hike and continued its Whig policies, opening a weekly edition aimed at Whigs as well.[89] Greeley directly attacked Loco-Focoism, painting the party as greedy and corrupt. By comparison, he pointed out, the Whigs were noble and stood for helping everyone, rich and poor. "*Have you no choice between the two?*" the newspaper asked.[90] At one point Greeley actually hit the campaign trail for the Whigs.[91]

In spite of the *Tribune's* obvious attachment to the Whig cause, Greeley did not see the paper as a typical party organ. He asserted that the party never dictated the newspaper's

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[85]Ibid., 10 May 1842.
[86]Ibid., 9 April 1842.
[87]Ibid., 11 April 1842.
[88]Ibid.
[89]Ibid., 1 August 1842.
[90]Ibid., 7 November 1842.
[91]Ibid., 7 November 1842.

contents.[92] Of course, it would have been pointless for the party to meddle with so ardent a supporter.

As far as Greeley and his business manager were concerned, penny newspapers were just that -- newspapers which happened to cost a penny. It did not matter to them that the party press was traditionally a six-penny medium; they saw that the concept of penny newspapers could be adapted to fit any circumstance. To them, the penny press was not so much a new form of journalism, but merely a new price for newspapers.

Was the Penny Press Innovative and Modern?

It would be foolish to assert that the penny press era did not leave a deep mark on journalism. It popularized both low prices for papers and newspaper economics based on sales instead of political party backing. Those factors changed the nature of newspapers -- advertising became more important, and people of all walks of life could afford to read the paper. The penny era thus established a readership basis and helped create an American thirst for the news. Also, the penny press specialized in local news and gave police reports legitimacy, thereby giving shape to some modern news forms. In addition, Bennett's crusading outlook -- although obviously eccentric -- laid a foundation for a future journalistic ideal of championing certain causes. Certainly these elements later became part of modern journalism, as so highly touted by historians.

The early founders of the penny press, however, did not set out to establish a truer form of journalism. The "new" aspect of the penny press, to them, was the low cost of each issue, and even that idea had been tried several times before. Day found that the penny price would sell papers and support his business. Bennett and Greeley realized that the highly popular penny price would get their own particular ideas into the hands of thousands of readers.

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[92]Ibid., 12 April 1842.

The notion that the men who started the penny press somehow foresaw modern journalism and strove to create it was proven absurd by *The Sun*, *The Herald*, and the *Tribune*. *The Tribune* was obvious -- it was a carryover from the party press era, and of course, modern journalists turn their noses up at newspapers backed by politicians. For its part, *The Sun* authored the famous Moon Hoax which so vexed Bennett. Curiously, even Bennett congratulated its writer,[93] and contemporaries acclaimed the hoax with great joy as the act which gave legitimacy to the penny press.[94] A deliberate hoax in modern journalism would get a newspaper shut down.

In another deviation from journalism as it would one day become, Bennett moved editorials to the front page, decrying news as too dry and dusty for such a prominent spot. Even Bennett's enthusiastic attacks on his rivals were not done to "scoop" others or to make some kind of modern journalistic achievement. Instead, his battles with other newspapers were his egocentric attempt to boost his paper's circulation, so that he could save mankind from itself. His crusades were certainly far more extreme and more personal than those which would be found in later journalism.

All three papers examined here tended to intermix editorial commentary with news or in close association with news, a style which modern newswriters generally dislike. In addition, all three newspapers featured a great deal of literary fare, from poems to short stories to moral fables to serialized novels. That feature would die out in modern journalism.

Obviously, Day, Bennett, and Greeley were *not* looking into a crystal ball and gazing upon the future of journalism, as so many historians claim. Their newspapers were *not* blueprints of a more "perfect" journalism yet to come.

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[93] *Herald*, 31 August 1835, and 5 September 1835.

[94] Newsmen of the era who later wrote histories complemented the hoax. See Hudson, p. 422, and "A Journalist," p. 190.

Truth to tell, *The Sun*, *The Herald*, and the *Tribune* could more accurately be described as reflections of ideas that already had been popular in the press, and as such they were hardly innovative at all. Literary fare, a popular penny feature, had been a staple in newspapers since colonial times. Police news as found in the cheap press was a hit in other papers which came before the penny press. Factional/party political attachments, which were still obvious in early one-cent papers, had long been present in journalism. It had been common to inject editorial ideas into the news for decades before the penny press, and the cheap press continued the practice. Despite that mixture of editorial and news, penny newspapermen claimed an interest in objectivity. But interestingly, newspaper editors had long thought of objectivity as a goal.[95]

Why, then, do historians think of the penny press as the origin of modern journalism instead of an extension of past journalism? Any number of historiographical prejudices have contributed to that notion. However, the bottom line is that James Gordon Bennett, in his fight to convince the public that his *Herald* was a savior in newsprint, defined the penny press in terms which modern journalists find pleasing. Bennett claimed to be independent and liberal. He alleged that his news was uninfluenced by party or faction. He claimed that his news was honest and unemotional.[96] He styled himself a newsman to the masses, a man interested in reform, and he saw his newspaper as the true, correct, and best vehicle for doing so.

Nineteenth-century readers may not necessarily have bought Bennett's brash claims, since *The Herald* did not succeed in killing off its rivals, but Bennett's self-description did impress historians. Bennett's managing editor Frederic Hudson, writing his *Journalism in the United States*, picked up on Bennett's themes and gave them the legitimacy of history. As one study has pointed out, press historians have quoted Hudson

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[95]See, for example, the *New-York Gazette; and Weekly Mercury*, 19 September 1777. Loyalist editors such as the *Gazette's* tended to beg for press objectivity and freedom from party control, probably so that their side's ideas might be circulated. While they may not have expressed a modern concept of objectivity, they did see objectivity as a goal.

[96]*Herald*, 5 January 1836.

as an authority ever since.[97] Not that Hudson should take all the blame for transforming the penny press into more than it was. The concept that time marches ever forward to new and better things, to a modern goal, has long appealed to historians, who are quick to repeat the theme.

In reality, though, developments in any field rarely happen in a vacuum. Each step draws some ideas from the preceding ones. That was certainly true with the penny press. Day and Wisner happened to make the penny press succeed, but their work was neither entirely new nor truly original. Their first successful penny paper actually assimilated ideas from various existing types of journalism, and the editors who followed them cut their newspapers from *The Sun's* pattern. The penny press built on the past -- just as modern journalism, in its way, built on some of the ideas of the penny press -- and chose to forget many others.

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[97] William J. Thorn, "Hudson's History of Journalism Criticized by his Contemporaries," *Journalism Quarterly* 57 (1980): 99.